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U.S. Officials Discount 'Bulgarian Connection'

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WASHINGTON— National Security Adviser William P. Clark and CIA Director William J. Casey now both lean toward the view that efforts to find a "Bulgarian connection" between Bulgarian intelligence agents and the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II have run dry, according to Reagan Administration officials.

Their new attitude follows a review of information available to the CIA.

It comes amid signs that the Kremlin has demonstrated unusually visible anger with the Bulgarians, and a report that the unusual visit of senior Bulgarian officials and churchmen to the Vatican last week was intended to discuss some aspects of the affair.

Soviet displeasure was seen earlier this month in an unprecedented announced visit of the new chief of the Soviet KGB security police to Sofia, and in a report that Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov was "read out" personally by Yuri V. Andropov, the new Kremlin leader and former KGB chief, during a visit by Zhivkov to Moscow.

There is speculation in Washington that both incidents are related to embarrassing ties that have been found by Italian investigators between the Bulgarian intelligence service and the Turkish gunman, Mehmet Ali Agca, who shot the Polish-born Pope on May 13, 1981. These links have led to widespread allegations that the Bulgarians hired Agca to kill the pontiff.

The theory has been that Bulgaria, the Soviet Union's closest ally, was acting on behalf of Moscow, which was presumed to blame the Pope for fomenting anti-Soviet unrest in Poland.

Embarrassing Ties

Adding credence to the speculation was the visit of the 12-member delegation from Bulgaria, led by a deputy foreign minister, to Rome on Thursday where they were received by the Pope in a private audience—the first since the assassination attempt. The announced reason for the visit was to mark the feast of St. Cyril, but this was the first time Bulgaria has celebrated the feast in this way since John Paul's election to the papacy in 1978.

Moreover, according to one knowledgeable U.S. official, reports from Eastern Europe earlier said that the delegation's purpose was "probably to discuss a political solution" to the Italian case against Sergei Antonov, the Bulgarian airline official who was arrested after being identified by Agca as an accomplice in the shooting.

Clark and Casey, while no longer inclined to believe in a Bulgarian connection, still strongly support the continuing search by Italian authorities for evidence that could tie the Turkish criminal, Agca, with Bulgarian—and Soviet—intelligence organizations.

There have been other recent developments in the case.

—Italian authorities investigating the attempt on the pontiff's life have now obtained enough photographs of St. Peter's Square to construct a montage of virtually all people present before, during and after the shooting, according to sources. Much of the film has been provided by American tourists, through the FBI, after a public appeal by the agency's director William H. Webster.

—A West German television program reported that one man photographed fleeing the square after the shooting in May 1981, apparently carrying a gun, has been identified as Oral Celik, also a Turk, who allegedly helped Agca assassinate a Turkish editor in 1979 and to then escape from a Turkish prison to Bulgaria.

Celik is reportedly in Bulgaria now, where authorities refuse to extradite him to Italy, much as they have another Turk in the case, Bekir Celenk, the man who supposedly promised Agca \$1.3 million to kill the Pope.

On White House orders, a detailed review of information available to the United States from the Italians and others was conducted. The review came after broadcast charges that CIA officials were discouraging efforts to find a connection, ostensibly to avoid a revelation that could prevent a summit meeting between Andropov and Reagan.

After the review, Casey came to agree with career CIA officials that the Bulgarians very probably did not direct Agca to shoot the Pope, although they probably did know his intentions and chose not to stop him.

Earlier this month, NBC correspondent Marvin Kalb reported that Casey also cited three other factors that caused him to "change his mind" from his earlier inclination to believe in the connection:

Lack of progress in the Italian investigation of the connection: reports from Rome about a possible trade of the arrested Bulgarian airline official, Antonov, who was one of Agca's alleged accomplices, for two Italians jailed in Bulgaria on espionage charges, and the persuasive denials in a New York Times report in April that a Bulgarian defector in France had provided supporting evidence for the connection theory.

"Casey's view now, which the CIA has presented convincingly, is that Agca was probably not hired by the Bulgarians," a knowledgeable Administration official said.

"Clark's position is somewhat short of that, between one that says there was no connection, and another that holds if there was some connection, we'll never be able to prove it," the official added. "He thinks that vein has just about petered out."

Officials flatly deny that the new Clark-Casey positions are related to any desire for a Soviet-American summit conference.

Analysts saw Soviet anger at the Bulgarians in the brief story recently in Pravda, Moscow's Communist Party newspaper, reporting that the new Soviet secret

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